

Frequently Asked Questions about Meningococcal Vaccine, the Meningococcal Vaccine Shortage and Meningococcal Disease

Questions about Meningococcal Vaccine

Are there vaccines that protect against meningococcal disease?

YES. There are currently two vaccines available that protect against four of the most common of the thirteen subgroups of *N. meningitidis* that cause serious disease.

Meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine is approved for use in those age two and older.

In January 2005, a new type of meningococcal vaccine called meningococcal conjugate vaccine was licensed; it is currently approved for use only in those 11- 55 years of age.

Both types of meningococcal vaccines are acceptable for individuals age 11 and older. However, meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine is the only licensed vaccine for those age 10 and younger and age 56 and older.

Both of these vaccines provide protection against four subgroups of the bacteria that account for approximately two-thirds of the cases that occur in the U.S. each year. Most of the remaining one-third of the cases is caused by a subgroup (B) that is not contained in the vaccine.

Protection by immunization with the meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine is not lifelong; it lasts about 3 to 5 years in healthy adults (some people may be protected longer.) The new meningococcal conjugate vaccine is expected to help decrease disease transmission and provide more long-term protection.

Who is meningococcal vaccine recommended for?

Meningococcal vaccine is currently recommended for:

- Children at 11-12 years of age
- Adolescents at high school entry (for the next 3 years until we are “caught-up”)
- Incoming college freshmen (and other newly enrolled students) living in dormitories
- Individuals at high risk including:
 - anyone with a damaged spleen or whose spleen has been removed;
 - travelers to countries where meningococcal disease is very common;
 - individuals with terminal complement component deficiency (an inherited immune disorder);
 - military recruits; and
 - microbiologists routinely exposed to meningococcal bacteria.

Where can children and adults get vaccinated?

They (or their parents) should contact their healthcare provider to discuss their risk and ask about the availability of the two different types of meningococcal vaccine. In addition, some residential schools and colleges are offering meningococcal vaccine to students.

What if my health care provider does not have meningococcal vaccine?

Unfortunately, currently the availability of both licensed meningococcal vaccines is somewhat limited nationwide.

The meningococcal conjugate vaccine is currently in very short supply due to the inability of the manufacturer (sanofi pastuer) to produce enough product to meet demand. Due to increased demand and inadequate supply the manufacturer is placing restrictions on meningococcal conjugate vaccine orders. Supplies of meningococcal

conjugate vaccine will improve over the next 2 years, but are not expected to be adequate for all recommended groups until 2008.

In addition, the other vaccine - meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine - is now somewhat limited as well. If your health care provider would like more information about the availability of these vaccines, they can call the manufacturer at 1-800-822-2463 or the MDPH Vaccine Unit at 617-983-6828.

How will the limited availability of vaccine impact the new Massachusetts school and college requirements for meningococcal vaccine?

The risk of meningococcal disease starts to increase in adolescence and young adulthood. In this age group, the highest rates of disease and death are in those 15-24 years

Beginning in August 2005, secondary schools and colleges that provide or license student housing will require new students to provide documentation of having received one dose of meningococcal vaccine (of either type) or provide a signed waiver declining vaccination.

A number of colleges and universities in Massachusetts have already purchased vaccine to offer to incoming students who will reside in dorms or other school-licensed housing who have are not yet vaccinated.

If vaccine is unavailable, the best option for students or their parents is to sign the waiver, wait until the supply of meningococcal conjugate vaccine improves, and get vaccinated as soon as it is available.

Questions about Meningococcal Disease

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by infection with bacteria that can infect the tissue that surrounds the brain and spinal cord and cause meningitis. It can also infect the blood or other organs of the body. In the US, about 2,600 people get meningococcal disease each year and, while it is treatable with antibiotics, 10-15% die despite receiving treatment. Of those who survive, about 10-15% may experience disability.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

These bacteria are passed from person-to-person through saliva (spit). Close contact with an infected person's saliva is required for the bacteria to spread. Close contact includes activities such as kissing, sharing water bottles, sharing eating/drinking utensils, sharing cigarettes with someone who is infected, or being within 3-6 feet of someone who is infected and is coughing and sneezing.

Who is at most risk for getting meningococcal disease?

- People who travel to certain parts of the world where the disease is very common.
- Children and adults with damaged or removed spleens or terminal complement component deficiency (an inherited immune disorder)
- People who live in certain settings such as college freshmen military recruits who live in dormitory-type settings.

For more information:

You can obtain more information about meningococcal disease or vaccination from your healthcare provider, your local Board of Health (listed in the phone book under government), or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>.